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ABSTRACT

Opportunity-to-Learn (OTL) benefits all students by providing information about how to improve the academic achievement of students, especially poor and minority students. This paper discusses ways in which the OTL conceptual framework can be expanded. OTL's conceptual framework identified four variables that have a powerful influence on teachers' teaching practices and student learning--content coverage, content exposure, content emphasis, and equality of instructional delivery. In 1995, the OTL framework was expanded to include the variables of family support for students' academic behavior, school support for students' academic behavior, and school support for students' behavior. The paper highlights ways to connect research information to classroom practices--through teacher logs, structured observations, surveys, interval testing, and small assessment tasks. Use of the expanded OTL framework provides guided inquiry for educators to determine how well students are being served and to improve the efforts of teachers and parents, which in turn should increase the academic achievement of all students. (Contains 25 references.) (LMI)

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THE NEED TO EXPAND THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: SHOULD STUDENTS, PARENTS AND SCHOOL RESOURCES BE INCLUDED?

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The Need to Expand the Opportunity to Learn Conceptual Framework: Should Students, Parents and School Resources Be Included?

Floraline I. Stevens

Opportunity to learn benefits all students by providing information about how to improve the academic achievement of students, especially poor and minority students. Research related to opportunity to learn is important because so many poor and minority students' academic achievement is low. In addition, data from the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) show a large gap between African American and Hispanic students on the one hand and white and Asian students on the other. Although the achievement gap is narrowing, White students, at ages 9, 13, and 17 perform at a higher level in reading, writing, science, and mathematics than the same age groups of African American and Hispanic students (Mullis, Owens, & Phillips, 1990).

All school reform efforts have emphasized the need to improve the academic achievement of students. In the 1990s school reform efforts (i.e., Goals 2000, development of content standards and new assessment procedures) continue to grow in emphasis and importance. At the National Science Foundation, many projects in its Education and Human Resources Directorate are funded to address through research, evaluation and models how to involve and retain underrepresented minority and female students in the sciences from elementary school to earning their doctorates. Recognized as part of the process needed to accomplish this goal was the improvement of students' opportunities to learn leading to higher academic achievement.

Impetus to Investigate Opportunity to Learn

In the Los Angeles Unified School District, the research and evaluation office was involved with a project that focused on improving the academic achievement of students in Chapter 1 elementary schools. These schools had some of the lowest achievement scores in the school district for over 20 years. The project was called the Ten Schools Program. Each school received extensive financial support and one of the supports was periodic assessment of achievement and reporting of students' progress scores on pre-determined learning objectives. Teachers in the Program met and agreed upon the learning objectives that would be

taught during the year and when they would be taught. The office collaborated with a test publisher and program teachers and developed a set of criterion-referenced mini-tests to assess student progress. After looking at the results for two eight-week periods, there were great score discrepancies among the classrooms at each of the grade levels. For those classrooms where most of the students did not show mastery of the learning objectives, the research staff questioned the teachers about whether or not they had taught the curriculum related to the learning objectives. They all responded affirmatively that they had taught the prescribed curriculum. However, the scores indicated that either the children were not taught the curriculum or if they were taught the curriculum, the teaching was poor. Upon further investigation and discussions with the teachers, their questions about how to teach a particular concept or skill indicated that these teachers needed assistance in improving their teaching practices, otherwise their students' opportunity to learn was in jeopardy.

The findings from the Ten Schools Program provided the impetus to investigate the topic of opportunity to learn when I went to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) as a senior research fellow in 1991. At NCES, a conceptual framework was developed for opportunity to learn through reviewing international and national research on the topic, by surveying 91 public school directors of research (Stevens, 1993), and from gathering teaching, learning and assessment information from national and international researchers who came to NCES to work on the TIMSS (Third International Mathematics and Science Study).

Opportunity To Learn--- The Original Framework

Opportunity to learn as a conceptual framework identified four variables that have a powerful influence on teachers' teaching practices and student learning. Previously, opportunity to learn studies looked at one variable at a time. The emphasis is on what teachers do in their classrooms when they are teaching students and whether or not they grant students sufficient access to information and resources to enable them to learn the curriculum for their age and grade level. This OTL concept is in contrast to those educators, researchers and policy-makers who often attribute the lack of students' academic achievement to the environment outside of the

school. Observers who attribute minority and poor students' low achievement solely to society's ills tend to dismiss the very important influences of schools and teachers in student learning.

The four opportunity to learn variables are tied to the providers of instruction, teachers and school principals, not to the students. The variables are: (1) content coverage; (2) content exposure; (3) content emphasis; and (4) quality of instructional delivery (Stevens, 1993).

Content Coverage -- Ascertains whether or not students cover the core curriculum and whether or not there is a match between the content of the curriculum taught and the content of the test or assessment (Leinhardt, 1983, Leinhardt & Seewald, 1981; Yoon, Burstein, Gold, Chen & Kim, 1990).

o Content Exposure -- Concerns the time allotted to students to learn (time on task) and the depth of teaching the subject (Wiley, 1990; Brophy & Good, 1986; Doyle, 1983; Winfield, 1987).

o Content Emphasis -- Determines which topics within the curriculum teachers emphasize and which students are chosen to receive instruction in low or high order skills (Goldenburg and Gallimore, 1991; Floden, Porter, Schmidt, Freeman, & Schwille, 1981; Shavelson & Stern, 1981).

o Quality of Instructional Delivery -- Reveals how teaching practices have an impact on students' academic achievement. This means that teachers have a cognitive command of the subject being taught and monitor their performance to ensure a coherent presentation of the lesson. (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; Alkin, Doby & Lindheim, 1990; Brophy & Good, 1986;). For example, observations of fourth grade teachers' teaching practices in the Ten Schools Program showed that the teachers had difficulty in implementing the literature- based approach to reading. This, in turn diminished the quality of their instructional delivery, which then lowered students' reading scores (Stevens, 1993, Summer).

Expanding the OTL Framework

In 1995, after additional review of research and discussions with educational researchers, teachers and school administrators about opportunity to learn, the OTL conceptual framework was expanded to include these additional variables (Stevens, 1995a):

- Family support for students' academic achievement.
- School support for students' academic achievement.
- School support for students' behavior.

o What do we mean --- Family support for students' academic achievement?

We must always remember that families are children's first and primary educators. The impact of family support on academic achievement is demonstrated in the National Longitudinal study of 1988 better known an NELS: 88 (Horn & West, 1992). One finding was that parents from low-SES families who never discussed future educational plans with their children had a negative impact on their children staying in school. These children tended to drop out of school between eighth and tenth grades.

Other studies show that poor children watch television more than children from affluent families; that television is taking the place of reading books; and heavy viewers of television scored poorly on reading assessments while light viewers scored highly (Elley, 1992).

Families, according to researchers, Stevenson and Stigler (1992), can do the following: control the negative aspects of TV viewing; insist that their children spend more time doing homework; help their children with homework; and have their children spend more time in academic pursuits. Many schools do not involve parents in learning constructive activities that support the academic achievement of their children. In many instances, this results in parents not knowing what to do to assist their children.

o What do we mean --- School support for students' academic achievement?

School environment is a vital part of students' opportunity to learn because the environment focuses on school delivery standards, curriculum standards, assessment standards and student performance standards. The generation of these new standards has required new approaches to curriculum, instruction and assessment. Among these are: building on the strengths children bring to school; providing scaffolding to guide students in completing complex tasks; and having students participate in cooperative and team learning. Teachers should assign tasks to students that involve cooperative learning, have more than one right answer, uses their prior knowledge and experiences, and have real meaning in their lives. These OTL-focused tasks increase students' motivation to learn. As a point of information, elementary, middle and senior high students in schools participating in the New Standards Program (1995), have as one of their performance goals to read and comprehend 25 books during each school year.

o What do we mean -- School support for students' behavior?

Teachers lose an inordinate amount of instructional time trying to reduce disruptive and non-productive student behavior. Freiberg's Consistency Management (1993) in five elementary schools in Houston, Texas addresses this problem. All students, not just the teacher's favorites, take leadership roles in managing all areas of the school --- classrooms, hallways, lunchroom and play yard. This strategy gave all students important organizational roles to carry out in their school. In the schools where the program operated, disciplinary referrals and suspensions dropped and academic achievement improved.

Applying the expanded opportunity to learn framework can be a catalyst for systematic change in schools.

Content coverage.

When teachers want to make sure that content coverage is adequately addressed in their classrooms, they must have more than superficial knowledge of the subject matter content to be taught. They must decide what are the essential concepts and skills that must be covered for students to successfully complete the grade level course or subject matter topic. For example, in the Ten Schools Program, the teachers scanned the State of California's curriculum frameworks for reading and language arts and mathematics. They realized that all of the information required to be taught could not be covered adequately in one year. Through, discussion, negotiation and finally, consensus, the teachers at each elementary grade level decided what would be the core curriculum that all children must be taught at each grade level. In addition, the teachers agreed to a schedule for when the skills and concepts would be taught. This allowed for a complementary assessment program with the agreement that only the content scheduled to be taught would be assessed. That is, the content to be taught was aligned with the content to be assessed. This systematic planning to address content coverage directed what content would be taught, when it would be taught, and that it would be monitored through interval assessment/testing to determine whether or not the content was being covered in the classrooms. Interval testing, at that time, was a short test of 3-4 items per concept or skill to determine mastery. Now, the same procedures could be applied using students' portfolios and performance-based assessments in addition to criterion-referenced testing.

Content Exposure

The level of students' exposure to subject matter is dependent upon accessible time. Teachers have to know how to manage their time to make sure there is enough time for their students to have in-depth learning experiences in their classrooms. In poorly managed classrooms, off-task activities and events consume much of the teaching time. Content exposure can be increased when teachers and their administrators make plans to maximize the time by making certain periods of the day sacrosanct for critical subjects. That is , there are no interruptions allowed during this period throughout the school and there is a commitment made by the teachers to teach

specified amounts of time for specific subjects. Also, such housekeeping tasks as --- taking attendance, collecting homework -- are routinized so they are completed quickly.

Content Emphasis.

A commitment to the concept that, "All children can learn" should influence teachers to use teaching strategies that include all of the students in their classrooms. Teachers need to be know the effects of using cooperative and group learning. They need to be trained how to effectively integrate cooperative and group learning strategies in their classrooms.

Quality of Instructional Delivery.

Haberman (1991) describes the teaching practices in many urban school classrooms as the "pedagogy of poverty" and says that these practices are responsible for keeping the academic achievement of poor and minority students at a very low level. In his research, he found 14 common teaching activities found in most urban school classrooms: giving information; asking questions; giving directions; making assignments; monitoring seat work; reviewing assignments; giving tests; reviewing tests; assigning homework; settling disputes; punishing non-compliance; marking papers; and giving grades. Taken separately, Haberman contends, there may be nothing wrong with these activities. However, it is the combination of them all performed to the systematic exclusion of other activities, that has a negative and devastating educational impact on the education of poor, urban students. In such settings, students are locked into a routine that does not allow them to be creative or involved in alternative modes of learning.

In contrast, teachers when planning their lessons must determine if there is a coherent presentation of the lessons in their classrooms. Coherence, according to Alkin, et al. (1990), means that the objectives of the lesson are identified in advance, skills presented are related to the lesson's objectives, and the lesson's activities match the lesson's objectives. Stevenson and Stigler (1992) ask if the lesson has a beginning, middle and end.

Family support for students' academic achievement.

Schools must welcome parents into their schools. Teachers and parents must collaborate on how to assist students to become better students. Many parents want to help their children but do not know what to do. Schools should offer a variety of classes for parents. In the Los Angeles School District, there are two projects that assist parents. The School Readiness Language Development Program (SRLDP) is for preschool children who are non-native speakers or non- standard speakers of English. Four days a week the children attend class and on the fifth day, classes are held for the parents and parent surrogates. Evaluation outcomes reported that former SRLDP students outpaced other students academically as they advanced through the elementary grades. The other program sent community persons to students' homes to show parents various educational activities to do with their children. The community persons encouraged the parents to come to school and confer with their children's teachers about their children's academic progress.

School support for students' academic achievement.

Teachers and school administrators need to know what to do about school delivery standards, curriculum standards, assessment standards and student performance standards. Inservice training to learn new approaches to curriculum, instruction and assessment is critical to provide the proper support for students to achieve academically. Teachers need to know how to build on the strengths children bring to school; how to provide scaffolding to guide students in completing complex tasks; how to involve effectively students in cooperative; and how to use new assessment approaches. Time must be made available for teachers and administrators to plan, to collaborate and to try new approaches.

School support for students' behavior.

New standards for curriculum and assessment are not enough. Behavior standards should be developed so that all students know what kinds of behaviors are expected while attending school. Programs like Consistency Management which uses positive practices to encourage good behavior should be implemented.

Using Opportunity to Learn Research Information

A teacher's desire to change or improve is not enough. There is the need to connect research information with practices in the classroom. One of the first steps in the change process is to acquire and use assessment information in relation to opportunity to learn. Several assessment strategies have been suggested and tried out in small scale research projects.

o Teacher Logs. Teacher logs of time spent on content subjects, amount of time and emphasis on different modes of instruction, and activities not related to instruction can be used to measure OTL (Porter, 1993).

o Observations. Structured observations can record the following: (a) percent of teaching periods within a specified number of days devoted to the subject content; (b) percentage of time devoted to teaching subject content within a period; and (c) amount of coherency in the lesson presented(Stevens, 1993; Stevenson and Stigler, 1992; Dorr-Bremme, Keesling and King, 1984).

o Surveys. Surveys can measure the material and resources available to students such as: (a) calculators and computers; teachers' access to instructional information through inservice education; and teachers' education and level of preservice education in content areas (Goertz, 1994) .

o Interval Testing and Small Assessment Tasks. Ongoing assessment of students' learning through testing and small assessment tasks can provide OTL information about the impact and quality of instructional delivery (Stevens, 1993).

Measuring opportunity to learn using the expanded conceptual framework.

One of the main arguments against measuring opportunity to learn is that it requires more of the teacher's time. However, the alternative to not investigating OTL variables is acceptance of the status quo in educating diverse populations of students. National and local academic achievement data show that large groups of minority and poor students in urban schools are not being served effectively.

These reports indicate that changes in current practices are necessary. However, changes without guidance or a framework can be fragmented and move in the wrong direction. Using the expanded opportunity to learn conceptual framework will provide the guided inquiry for educators to determine how well students are being served and to improve the efforts of teachers and parents which in turn should increase the academic achievement of all students, especially poor and minority students. To move this research agenda forward, one of the applied research projects in the newly funded Mid-Atlantic Laboratory for Student Success at Temple University is investigating what opportunity to learn assessment practices are "teacher-friendly" --- sustainable over time (Stevens, 1995b). The intent is make students' opportunity to learn an ongoing concern for teachers and parents.

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